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ABSTRACT

In most churches, Bible and other religious instruction is based on an evangelical model structured on a teacher-centered, lecture-oriented approach that involves treating adults as children and that is thus more consistent with unregenerate human nature than with the born-again nature of Christians. An emancipatory model of Christian adult education is needed that includes consideration for the principles of andragogy. Andragogy, the science of adult learning, is based on the belief that the ways in which adults and children learn differ from five standpoints: self-concept, life experience, readiness to learn, time perspective, and orientation to learning. Each component of andragogical philosophy holds important insights for adult Christian education. The works of Walter Ong, Malcolm Knowles, and Paulo Freire present an alternative, more participative modality through which educators and clergy can transmit theological processes and principles. A model process called a praxis cycle has been developed based on principles proposed by Ong, Knowles, and Freire and has been suggested as a model for delivering emancipatory education for Christian adults. According to the model, teachers/facilitators use dialogue to help students/disciples develop the competencies required to become biblically literate, critically conscious, and actively involved Christian citizens. (Contains 28 references.) (MN)

ANDRAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED:
Emancipatory Education for Christian Adults

by
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January, 1995

ABSTRACT

Current evangelical approaches to Christian adult education are generally limited to teaching theological principles and doctrines through teacher-centered, lecture-oriented modalities. Although intended to facilitate maturity, these methods, rooted in errant assumptions, actually serve to perpetuate spiritual immaturity and oppress the consciousnesses of Christian adults. This paper draws upon the historical analysis of Ong, as well as the works of Knowles and Freire to present an alternative, more participative modality through which educators and clergy can transmit theological processes and principles. By following a model process, called a *praxis cycle*, teacher/facilitators utilize dialogue to help disciples develop the competencies necessary become biblically literate, critically conscious, and actively involved Christian citizens.

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ANDRAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

Emancipatory Education for Christian Adults

by John C. Lai, Fielding Institute, HOD Program

During my twelve-year tenure as a pastor-teacher I was constantly amazed, befuddled, and frustrated in my attempts to impart to other Christian adults a sound biblical understanding of the nature and work of God. No matter what or how I preached and taught, either from the pulpit and in smaller groups, people seemed to come away with individual conceptions of God. Some of these were reasonably sound; others bordered on the bizarre. All were idiosyncratic to some degree.

Not all of these *personal theologies* were readily apparent. Usually they surfaced during some personal crisis which required counseling, or some behavioral or lifestyle choices which tacitly betrayed an incomplete or unscriptural concept of the Almighty and what was required of a disciple of Jesus (or 'normal Christian'). These choices and behavioral tendencies were not as distressing as the convoluted theo-rationalizations some came up with in order to reduce their cognitive dissonance and still remain upstanding "biblical" Christians.

Another problem I encountered was what I regarded as a disproportionate amount of apathy and lethargy. I always had relatively high-involvement congregations, but I still found the typical member generally too passive when it came to making decisions, taking responsibility for action, and getting involved. It seemed that, concerning matters both spiritual and material, many people were content to live vicariously through the labors of others--others' revelations, others' prayers, others' evangelism, others' Bible studies, others' good works, etc.

Finally, I found that many Christian adults, of various denominational affiliations, could not distinguish between those doctrines and practices which

originated from Christ and the Apostles, and those which were imposed by the particular organization or denomination with which they aligned themselves. This was rarely a problem with members who were spiritually birthed from my congregation. I noticed it more with people who migrated from other church systems into ours, as well as with some who were raised from childhood in a church environment.

My quest to understand these phenomena led me to pursue a doctorate in the behavioral and social sciences. I felt I needed to resign from the pastorate until I could resolve what I regarded to be some serious problems with the adult educational process within western Christianity. I needed to reexamine my role as an educator of adults, as well as step back and take a fresh look at the whole system of Christian adult education as practiced in the United States.

Those readers who are familiar with adult educational theories will recognize that the title of this essay contains inferences to Malcom Knowles' (1978) philosophy of adult learning and Paulo Freire's (1993) philosophy of emancipatory education. These theories and the historical analysis of Walter Ong (1982) have provided me some insights and possible solutions to the problems described above. However, the title is more than a clever play on words. It also hints at what I believe is at the crux of the issue: The social institution we call "church" generally *oppresses* people by means of educational and governmental processes which ostensibly facilitate mature Christian citizenship, but actually serve to administer and reinforce extrabiblical normative control. This results in both the perpetual immaturity and disempowerment of the laity as well as the continual necessity of providing "ministry professionals" as caretakers. Those among my readers who will argue that describing the Church as oppressive is too extreme might prefer Radcliffe's & Fortosis' (1993, p. 11) characterization: "There

is probably no more *destructive force* upon the individual responsibility of the laity in ministry than the centralized 'ministering' professional" (emphasis added).

In this paper I present some suggestions for an approach to adult Christian education which, while taking into account the propensity for self-theologization, aims to develop reflectively active and personally responsible disciples who can distinguish between divinely-ordained doctrines and practices from those which are merely institutionalized social constructions. First, I examine some existing assumptions and historical developments which I believe are root causes of the symptoms described above. Next, I explore some educational theories which I think offer relevant insight. Finally, I present the beginning of a model for emancipatory Christian education.

Treating Adults as Children

The New Testament portrays the Christian life as involving a conflict between the residue of sinful inclinations remaining from the old "pre-born-again" nature (often referred to by the Apostle Paul as the *flesh*) and the new "born-again" tendency toward righteousness (Rom. 7:25; Gal. 5:17)[1]. It seems reasonable, then, that the goal of Christian education is to facilitate, strengthen, and support the development of the new nature--to nurture the seed of Christ which resides within every believer (I John 3:9). This has always been my goal. How is it then, that I (and many of my colleagues) have encountered the problems I described earlier?

I contend that most of our institutional structures and processes are based on errant assumptions about regenerated human nature. While seeking to nurture the spirit, we inadvertently strengthen the flesh. We do not assume that "born-again" individuals both intrinsically desire and have the capacity (in Christ) to

[1] All biblical citations/quotations are taken from The New American Standard Bible.

freely and successfully walk in relationship with God. Instead, we often begin from the more skeptical premise that the depraved remnant of a person's old life will dominate unless we paternalistically intervene with extrinsic controls.

Secular management development educators have long been well aware of how leader assumptions about human nature influence educational processes and outcomes. One of most popular and enduring theories in this vein is McGregor's (1960) Theory X & Y model of these assumptions. Theory X assumes that: people dislike putting forth effort; they try to avoid responsibility; they prefer to be told what to do; and must be coerced and controlled to achieve goals. Theory Y, on the other hand, assumes, among other things, that: putting forth effort is natural; people can learn to be responsible and self-directed; and that they will be intrinsically motivated to achieve goals they believe in or are committed to. Theory Y views the symptoms associated with Theory X as caused by the institutional environment. "If employees are lazy, indifferent, unwilling to take responsibility, intransigent, uncreative, uncooperative, Theory Y implies that the causes lie in management's methods of organization and control" (p. 48). Weisbord (1987) prefers to view all people as having a combination of both X and Y tendencies. Which of these is more dominant in their behavior depends on which inclinations the milieu of organizational structures and managerial practices promotes and reinforces.

The analogy of the Theory X & Y model to the Pauline doctrine of the spirit and the flesh is obvious. However, it should be noted that this humanistic theory fails as a strict analogy because it contradicts biblical descriptions of the nature of fallen humanity. From an evangelical perspective, a Theory X assumption about *unregenerate* human nature *is* scripturally accurate. Yet, if we are talking about adults who are *already* Christians, is it not more sensible to treat them in a manner consistent with their new nature? Should not the indwelling

Holy Spirit be given the benefit of the doubt? "Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh...if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (II Corinthians 5:16, 17). Theory Y assumptions are more consistent with the new nature in Christ.

Balfour and Marini (1991) have noted that the Theory X perspective has led to organizational structures and educational processes which treat adults as children. In the Church this is apparent in those settings where, "for the good of the flock," pressure exists, either implicitly or explicitly, to conform to externally imposed, often extrabiblical behavioral norms and doctrinal standards. When authorities tell people what is right or wrong, what to do or not to do, and what the Bible *really* says, it is no wonder that people grow passive, lethargic, and irresponsible. Why should the laity put forth any effort when their leaders will do it for them? Why should they develop skills of critical thinking and spiritual discernment when they can hire a professional instead? When leaders work from a Theory X perspective, they develop organizations and processes which perpetuate immaturity, thus dependency, in followers (see Sievers, 1994). A Theory X church environment reinforces Theory X attitudes and behaviors in church members.

Balfour and Marini propose as a counterbalance a Theory Y approach to adult education which recognizes the relative independence, larger experience base, and more mature cognitive capacity of the adult learner. These distinctions roughly parallel and are largely derived from Knowles' (1978) philosophy of *andragogy*, which I address later in this paper. Among corporate training professionals, there is evidence to suggest that effective trainers hold Theory Y assumptions and are more likely to create collaborative learning environments for their students (Franklin & Freeland, 1989).

The Christian corollary of Theory Y education recognizes that the average Christian adult, with the proper tools and a conducive learning environment, is as capable as any theologian of learning spiritual truth and developing righteous behavioral habits through his/her own meditation, study, and practice. Every believer has the Holy Spirit, who guides into all truth (John 16:13). This anointing teaches all things so that nobody has any need for a human tutor (I John 2:27). This does not necessarily mean that there is no need for pastors and teachers in the Church today. However, it does suggest that the adult Christian need not depend on leaders and institutions for spiritual nurture and development. It also indicates a need to develop a more collaborative approach to Christian education to replace, or at the very least, supplement the prevailing teacher-centered model where the pastor is the sole authority and expert on biblical exposition and other spiritual matters.

Principle and Process

In most churches, Bible and other religious instruction is typically delivered in a lecture format where the pastor or teaching elder expounds and interprets for an audience of passive listeners. In smaller groups, some discussion may be allowed and even encouraged, but the process remains mostly teacher-centered. This format is not surprising for at least three reasons. The first is that many pastors hold Theory X assumptions about their congregations. Second, because most religious leaders are trained in colleges and seminaries with teacher-centered methods of content delivery, they naturally and unconsciously reenact the same models and processes in their churches.

The third reason lies in a key distinction between the seminary and the sanctuary. Seminary students are not just schooled in theological principles and truths, but also the underlying philosophies, tools, and methods used to derive

theology. Thus, professional clergy are equipped in both *principle* and *process*. Christian laypeople, however, are often exposed only to the product of theological study and reflection (i.e., principles or doctrines). They are not formally trained in the process of theologizing.

This dichotomy between principle and process on the level of lay education is magnified when one considers that it is one thing to teach theological truth and quite another to live it out. Even when sound Bible teaching is clearly presented from the pulpit, it is assimilated by each hearer into a unique biographical milieu. According to Hiebert (1988, p. 388), Anabaptists have long recognized this:

> They affirmed the fact that there is objective reality and objective truth (reality as God sees it, as it really is). They recognized, however, that *all truth as perceived by humans was partial and had a subjective element within it*. Human knowledge exists in people. Therefore, it must be understood in the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which people live (emphasis added).

Every person must fit biblical truth into his/her life without the benefit of any formal training in hermeneutical reflection . Thus, in a sense, each person is an amateur intepreter of the Word, therefore an amateur theologian. The personal theologies referred to earlier are the result.

Theological truths are usually taught as timeless objective principles and rules. What is often ignored, however, is that all truths are learned only when received, processed, and lived out subjectively over time. For example, the principles of grace are simple, clear, and easily taught. However, learning to appropriate grace into one's life experience is a life-long process. I can recite the principles much better than I can live them. So it is with all spiritual truths; in real life, principle cannot be separated from process.

The separation of principle from process is possibly due to the fact that western civilization has evolved from a primarily orally-based culture to one that is more chirographic or writing-based. As the means of knowledge transmission has moved from more oral to more written, knowledge has become increasingly disconnected from real everyday existence:

> Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle... It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in a human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. (Ong, 1982, p. 43-44)

Typographic or printed media only compound this estrangement. Ong argues that as societies become more literate, consciousness becomes qualitatively restructured. Writing (or reading) a text interiorizes what is normally (in an oral culture) external dialogue. In oral discourse, words (sounds) are dynamic events which unfold in real-time. Written words are static and time-independent, thus more easily separated from immediate social context.

Although Christianity is based on the Bible, a canonized collection of written texts, it is important to remember that these texts emerged out of what was primarily an oral culture (Semitic). Only priests and rabbis (and perhaps the wealthy) had access to manuscripts. The common people could listen to the reading of scripture in the temple or synagogue and they could discuss and debate meanings with one another, but they could not study the texts for themselves in their own homes. The earliest catachumens of the Church were actually oral transmissions (Radcliffe & Fortosis, 1993).

Since the time of Christ, the text of the Bible has passed through several transformations, each of which has further removed it from its original context. The words of Jesus were spoken in Aramaic and/or Hebrew, hand-recorded in Aramaic and Greek, and ultimately translated into Latin. Because the common

people of the Roman Empire largely spoke exclusively local dialects, only priests schooled in Latin could read the still scarce sacred texts. Lay people were dependent upon the professional priesthood to interpret God's revelation for them. Professional priests eventually became an entrenched class of official *mediators-of-meaning*. If the clergy wanted to distort the scriptures toward their own ends, no one would be the wiser. Because of mass biblical illiteracy, the government of the Church gained absolute control over the lives of the laity. This dominance continued through the dark ages.

With the Reformation, the providential invention of the printing press, and the publishing of the Guttenberg Bible, the scriptures were finally made available to the common person. These events sparked concurrent evolutions in the consciousnesses of believers, the power of Church government, the role of the professional clergy. First, as the masses became scripturally literate, their modes of thinking were restructured. What had been to most an exclusively oral religion became a textual one. Reflexive analytical thought was no longer the exclusive province of the learned professionals. Second, the evolved consciousness of the audience required a modified role for the teachers:

> The gospel was now accessible to everybody who could read. The Church could no longer present itself as a long chain of oral transmissions; it had to change itself into a system of instructing and supporting reading believers. Again preaching did not become superfluous; but it had to be good preaching with a view to the fact that all cross-references of the religious belief system were available as written and printed text. (Luhmann, 1990, p. 151)

The authority of the clergy over everyday life diminished. Now, instead of having direct and absolute control of meaning, they could only expound and elaborate on those truths contained in the Bible. Corrupt clergy could no longer easily impose

grossly extrabiblical requirements on the people. The doctrines of justification by faith alone, the sole mediatorship of Christ, and the universal priesthood liberated the masses from dependence on professional priests.

However, the emancipation that resulted from the Reformation was imperfect for at least two reasons. First, professional clergy still maintained significant dominance as professional teachers. Though the laity had the scriptures, they did not have training in exegetical and hermeneutical methods. Therefore, the clergy still controlled how the scriptures were interpreted. Only professionals could affirm what the Biblical authors "really" said or meant because only they were schooled in the esoteric methods of theology. Because the learning of methods was still confined to the clergy, Church leaders were able to monopolize meaning unobtrusively. The coercive control of the Church of Rome in the dark ages was replaced by the normative control of the Reformation Church. So it has continued for the past four centuries.

This continued oppression is not necessarily sinister and deliberate, except perhaps in some cases. Whether intentional or not, however, oppression is still oppression. As long as the laity must depend on someone else to spoon-feed them the truth of the gospel, they remain enslaved, not voluntarily to Christ, as Paul encouraged, but unconsciously to an institutional system which by its very nature perpetuates immaturity and dependency.

If we extend Ong's observations into the present and beyond, we must face the implications of the break-neck pace of technological evolution. It is now possible for the average person with a computer and a CD-ROM drive to access entire theological libraries of commentaries, encyclopedias, concordances, lexicons, and multiple Bible translations. With a little effort any layperson can consult with many of the same parabiblical sources that theologians and pastors use. If this development does not portend a diminished need for professional

exposition, it at least enables the laity to become less dependent on the clergy for Bible interpretation.

The effect of technological development on Bible teaching alone is enough to require us to rethink the relevance of teacher-centered methods in adult Christian education. But, there is another trend emerging which will also require a reexamination of the organizational context of learning: the emergence of what might be called the *virtual church* or the *cyberchurch*. Religious conversation (fellowship?) now transpires on the Internet, the World-Wide Web, and virtual chat rooms across the globe (Doebler, 1995).

The cyberchurch will probably further facilitate the emergence of more network-like church organizations vis a vis the more traditional hierarchies. These networks will most likely consist of interdependent nodes of local churches, small groups, and individuals. The capacity of certain groups and individuals to exert normative control over others will be inhibited. New learning contexts will be needed which empower Christian laity to become self-directed learners, as well as more active participants in traditional learning environments (Lewis, 1993).

In summary, there are three reasons why we must develop new approaches to Christian adult education. First, conventional teacher (or pastor)-centered approaches have arisen out of underlying assumptions which reinforce the flesh over the spirit. Second, most lay education separates principle from process, leaving people ill-equipped to make relevant connections between the Bible and real-life situations. Third, due to the coevolution of the Church and its socio-technical milieu, new organizational structures are emerging in which traditional educational modalities are less functional.

In my opinion, there are two major developments in adult education which Christian educators need to explore. The first is *andragogy*, an approach to learning which takes into consideration the unique learning needs and abilities of

adults. The other is *emancipatory* learning, which seeks to liberate the learner's consciousness from confining social, cultural, and cognitive contexts.

Andragogy: Treating Adults as Adults

Earlier I argued that traditional approaches to adult Christian education stem from assumptions which are more consistent with unregenerate human nature than with the born-again nature of the Christian. From a theological perspective, such methods might actually be termed "legalistic" because they treat adults as children who need a "tutor" (lit. Gk. "child-conductor"; Gal. 2:24) or extrinsic control system in order to mature.

An emancipatory model of Christian adult education must take into consideration what is known about how adults learn. The most well-received philosophy of adult education is known as *andragogy*. Andragogy first emerged in Europe and was championed in the United States by Malcom Knowles (1978). Knowles' original conception of andragogy was as a sharp contrast to pedagogy, the education of children. However, as Mirriam (1993) points out, the theory has evolved into more of a contingency perspective where pedagogy and andragogy form opposite poles on a continuum ranging from teacher-directed to student-directed learning modalities. Either may be appropriate for both adults and children, depending on the situation.

Andragogy is based on five philosophical assumptions of how adults and children generally differ in their approaches to learning: self-concept, life experience, readiness to learn, time perspective, and orientation to learning (Knowles, 1978). Because I find readiness to learn and time perspective to be closely related to learning orientation, I prefer to include them in that category, making three base assumptions out of the five. Each component of andragogical philosophy holds important insights for adult Christian education.

SELF-CONCEPT

The andragogical view of self-concept presumes that as people psychologically mature their need and desire for self-directedness increases. Adults are less dependent than children. From a Christian perspective, this translates to an increasing awareness of one's uniqueness in Christ, as well as one's personal relationship and accountability to God (Eph. 4:14-16). Self-directedness for the Christian is actually *self-in-Christ-directedness*. That is, the mature Christian is less likely to take behavioral cues from the social environment, and more likely to behave out of internalized aspects of the personality of Christ and/or direct cues from the Holy Spirit. I maintain that a mature Christian appears (from the standpoint of an observer) to have an internal locus-of-control versus an external locus-of-control. However, the phenomenological reality of the mature Christian is better described as an *eternal locus-of-control*, i.e., I may appear self-directed to others, but I experience my own life as directed by God.

This view of self-concept immediately presents a problem when dealing with the "new-born" Christian adult. Such an individual is simultaneously self-directed (by virtue of being a human adult), yet spiritually immature (being only a recent convert), and, therefore, to a certain extent, spiritually dependent on the Christian community. Traditional approaches to Christian education emphasize a formal teacher-centered lecture (or sermon) format in which the spiritual babe is spoon-fed the Bible. In this format, repeated millions of times every Sunday morning around the world, the disciple remains mostly passive. The adult's capacity for self-direction often is not utilized in the educational process. I maintain that this process oppresses the laity because it actually *trains-out* self-directness and tacitly teaches people to become more passive, thus, more dependent on the clergy for spiritual nurture. An andragogical alternative would

include a collaborative component in which the new disciple contracts with a mentor or fellow disciple to pursue individualized spiritual learning and Bible study of his/her (the new disciple's) own choosing. The use of interactive groups is another approach that is consistent with andragogy.

LIFE EXPERIENCE

Andragogy also recognizes that adults possess a broader experience base than children. This experience base can be utilized in the learning process. Educational content and methods which ignore or downplay experience (as in many Christian groups) often fail to achieve relevance in the minds of many adult learners. It is difficult for people to meaningfully connect new truths to their lifeworlds when their own experiences are minimized or labeled as inappropriate by teaching authorities. I find this denial of the experiences of others to be another form of institutional oppression. A Christian andragogy would neither validate nor invalidate experience; rather, it would encourage hermeneutical reflection upon present and past life experiences in the light of Biblical truths, principles, and values, thus linking the phenomenological to the theological. A Christian andragogical methodology would also employ experiential learning techniques (Hendrix & Hendrix, 1975).

Life experiences provide the data which make up each person's unique biographical learning milieu. In a sense, each individual *is* his/her experience. A person's experience shapes his/her worldview. Although members of a fairly homogeneous culture share what might be called a *macro-worldview*, each individual also functions through a distinctive *micro-worldview*. Because these worldviews filter both the contents of experience *and* theological learning, each person tends to develop a theology which can, on the level of confession, appear to be fairly orthodox, but, at the level of daily *practice* (where theology is put into action), becomes idiosyncratic. Traditional approaches to discipleship tend to

strive against this tendency and toward conformity and uniformity of both confession and practice. An andragogical model might accept, even encourage individual theology and practice, while seeking unity at a meta-level by equipping individuals with common interpretive tools (Lai, 1992).

ORIENTATION TO LEARNING

Andragogy acknowledges that an adult's *readiness to learn* is predicated more upon felt needs arising out of "the developmental tasks required for the performance of his evolving social roles" (Knowles, 1978, p. 57), than what societies demand or institutions mandate. Most parents and pedagogues are familiar with questions such as "Why do I have to learn this?" from the child who is required to memorize multiplication tables, Bible verses, or some other subject matter. Adults, however, often pursue their own learning, once they recognize their needs (Tough, 1979).

Closely related to readiness to learn is the *time perspective* of the learning intervention. Pedagogy is generally *prospective*, that is, it seeks to prepare children for the future--future academic pursuits, future careers, future social roles, etc. Andragogues recognize that adults are more motivated to learn when subject content addresses either the issues with which they are presently concerned or those which lie within an identifiable horizon. Thus andragogy is more *problem-centered* than *content-centered.*

Both learning orientations: time perspective and degree of problem centeredness, can affect retention level. I learned this long before I ever heard of andragogy. When I began teaching seminars for Church leaders, I taught them everything *I thought* they needed to know in order to be effective--a pedagogical methodology often referred to disparagingly by professional trainers as "information dumping." Within a few days or weeks students would inevitably approach me for solutions to problems they had encountered. More often than not,

the answers they sought were to be found in their own seminar notes. They had not retained my imparted wisdom because, at the time of the seminar, they had not been aware of their needs. Once they encountered the gap between their knowledge and skills and what their roles required, they learned and retained what they needed. I eventually learned to follow a more andragogical orientation in which I first helped students assess their own immediate learning needs, then mutually planned learning objectives. I also learned to substitute shorter and more widely spaced workshops for the longer content-intensive seminars I was accustomed to giving. This allowed for better timing of content with the learning curves of students, as well as the flexibility to renegotiate objectives and adjust content to match both immediate and emerging needs.

So, andragogical philosophy applied in a Christian context will help liberate adult Christian learners by: 1) encouraging more self-directedness in learning; 2) utilizing experience as both an impetus and a tool of the learning process; 3) tailoring training and education to fit immediate felt needs and real-life problems. In other words, an emancipatory model of Christian education will be more learner-centered than teacher-centered, as Trester (1984, p. 345) argues:

> I suggest that if a major change in the landscape of adults' abilities to grasp and assimilate modern biblical scholarship in respectable depth is going to happen, it will happen only when we shift the focus from the activity of the teacher, however qualified and gifted, and begin to refocus attention on the learners, and what goes on when real learning happens in adults.

Beyond focus and process, perhaps the most important contribution of andragogy is the implicit shift in the *relationship* between teacher and student (Pratt, 1993). Christian pedagogy presumes a clear master-disciple (adult-child) relationship between clergy and laity. Christian andragogy posits a more facilitative and

collaborative relationship between clergy and laity, where Jesus is the only Master (Matt. 23:8), and both mentors and mentees are adult colearners.

Emancipation: Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

If the clergy-laity relationship is to be one of collaborative learning, the layperson's involvement must be as an active participant in the process, rather than a mere passive recipient of principle. Furthermore, if the typical layperson is to develop the ability to discern between what is of God and what is merely institutional, it is imperative to develop skills of critical reflection. Therefore, an emancipatory Christian education model must include: 1) a learning environment and structure which facilitates participation on the part of learners; and 2) a process which develops the capacity for critical reflection. Paulo Freire developed such an educational approach while working with illiterate Brazilian peasants. Over the past few decades his model has evolved into a theory of social change which has influenced cultural change movements in several Latin American and African nations.

Freire's ideas are grounded in the strange bedfellows of Christian theology and Marxian social theory. However, as Taylor (1993, p. 56) notes:

> Freire was never converted to Marxist, revolutionary politics. When he makes his appeal for the creation of those conditions that will combat oppression, his core argument is couched not in the language of Marxism, but in the biblical terms of love, faith, hope, and humility.

As such, his name has been associated both with the liberation theology and the Base Ecclesial Community (BEC) movement of Latin America (Emge, 1988). It is difficult to tell whether the religious movements influenced Freire or vice versa. They all appear to have emerged concurrently in the late 1960s. Freire's literacy campaign began with the same people groups who were also participating in

BECs sponsored by the Roman Catholic church. It is possible that liberation theology was first articulated by some of the same priests who were working with these groups. If so, the development of all three can best be understood as coevolutionary in nature.

I do not embrace liberation theology because it contains what I consider unorthodoxies and an overt (Marxist) political slant. Yet, evangelicals can learn from it's emphasis on social justice and contextual application of scripture (Smith, 1992). Especially appealing is liberation theology's philosophy of *praxis*, i. e., theory linked to practice through reflection. When taken to an extreme (and out of a biblical context) this idea has fueled communist revolutions in Latin America. However, praxis itself, in the purest sense of the term, is biblically sound. An orthodox theology devoid of context-specific actions is ineffective in carrying out the Great Commission. God's people are known, and Christ is glorified, by and through deeds as well as proclamations (Matt. 5:16).

Base Ecclesial Communities are small groups of Christians (usually Catholic) who gather for prayer, fellowship, and study. The lack of a leader-centered format distinguishes them from typical U. S. home study groups or "cells" (Neighbour, 1990). The study emphasis also differs. Instead of focusing on the Bible abstractly, these groups also study the world and their lives in the world. They then attempt to interpret their lives in the world through the lens of scripture, reshaping their actions as a result of that interpretation. Leaders, usually clergy or lay elders, act as facilitators in this process (Emge, 1988).

Freire called his first alternative learning groups *culture circles*. They functioned much like BECs and similar alternative learning groups in the U. S. "Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue, instead of pupils, group participants..." (Freire, 1981, p. 42). Learning centered around topics generated by the participants, rather than by the coordinator.

Freire's approach to education arises out of his dissatisfaction with conventional methods. He views traditional education as an instrument of oppression. Oppressive social systems are perpetuated and strengthened by educational modalities which keep the oppressed in a state of *intransitive awareness*, where individuals are unable to distinguish between self and the world. People remain ignorant of their oppression, and even come to accept it as normal (Taylor, 1993). Traditional education fails to develop the *critical consciousness* (i.e., the ability to differentiate between self and the world) Freire says is necessary for the oppressed to liberate themselves. He describes conventional education as:

> the *banking* concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the *deposits*. ...knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. (Freire, 1993, p. 53, emphasis added).

Teachers project ignorance onto the taught. In so doing they inhibit the process of inquiry on the part of learners. This type of education is ideologically *prescriptive* in that it involves "the imposition of one individual's choice upon another" (Freire, 1993, p. 29) in order to conform the learner's consciousness to that of the teacher.

While Freire criticizes secular educational traditions, I find similar problems within adult Christian education. Much of the Bible teaching that I have experienced, both as student and teacher, fits the "banking" concept. Evangelicals often assume that merely "depositing" the Bible into people will transform lives. What is often overlooked, however, is that it is in the "doing of the word" that transformation is effected (James 1:22-25). Yet, most Christian learning situations are designed around a banking philosophy, where the learner sits passively and

listens. Pastors and teachers often take the position of experts, while the laity are considered to be little more than "stupid sheep." This is taking Isaiah's (53:6) simile too far!

Of course, educational processes which reinforce learner passivity are convenient for those whose livelihoods depend on having regular audiences for their sermons. Herein lies the insidious and oppressive logic of these systems: by keeping the laity passive and dependent, there are always sheep for the shepherds! As long as the laity do not become too spiritually discerning or critically conscious, they are less likely to discover the hypocrisies of their institutions and leaders. Such revelations might provoke some people to call for change within their institutions or to affiliate with other groups. They may even choose not to affiliate with any traditional institution, opting instead for more informal forms of fellowship.

As I stated earlier, I am not suggesting that this is a conspiracy on the part of professional clergy. Freire would say that the oppressors themselves are victims of the same oppression which they perpetuate. Yet, those of us who purport to lead and/or teach others are ultimately accountable for promoting models and processes which enslave the consciousnesses of the people of God (James 3:1). Most teaching I see in the Church-at-large is prescriptive in nature. Typically, some "man of God" prescribes to a (presumably) less enlightened disciple what is right, what is wrong, and what a Christian *should* be doing.

This presents no problem in instances where the New Testament is clearly prescriptive. However, I have often heard extrabiblical ideas prescriptively and dogmatically taught alongside of biblical truth--even in what are commonly considered to be good theologically sound churches. For example, I recently heard a pastor rail against the discipline of psychology. One of his major premises was that theories of psychology were rooted in the assumptions of "worldly" (i.e., non-

biblical) philosophies. This was supposedly reason enough for Christians to dissociate themselves from psychology. This pastor was blind to the fact that he was making his argument using Aristotelian logic--a system which is rooted in a worldly philosophy! Most in the audience were also ignorant of this hypocrisy.

The above example illustrates a type of intransitive awareness which permeates the Church in the western world. Not only is the self-world distinction a problem, but the vast majority of Christians, both lay and professional, are unable to differentiate between self and *institution*. Thus, identity in Christ is obfuscated by hegemonic church ideologies which have little or no basis in the New Testament. These ideologies become incorporated into individual *meaning perspectives*, the habituated expectations through which people interpret their life experiences (Mezirow, 1991). The average person cannot distinguish between biblical norms and the norms of his or her particular church. In the undiscerning mind of the oppressed, the will of the institution and will of God are one and the same.

CONSCIENTIZATION, PRAXIS, AND DIALOGUE

As an alternative to banking/prescriptive education, Freire offers a process he calls *conscientization* (Taylor, 1993). Conscientization involves moving from a state of intransitive awareness to a state of critical consciousness, marked by the ability to reflect upon self and society. Self-reflection does indeed increase the likelihood that entrenched meaning perspectives will be challenged and transformed (Cranton, 1994). But, for Freire, this consciousness is more than the ability to reflect critically; it must also result in the transformation of social reality. Any critical awareness which remains within the minds of learners is incomplete; it is theory only, not *praxis*.

Praxis is more than simply putting theory into practice. Freire's notion of the construct involves a continuous cycle of action-reflection-knowledge-action-

reflection-knowledge, action, etc. Praxis provides "the linkage between ontology and epistemology" or the connection between reality and knowledge (Taylor, 1993, p. 57). True knowledge is not generated in a vacuum. People are situated within and act upon the world; the world acts upon them. Therefore, *the truly literate person never reads the word without also reading the world* at the same time (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Knowledge is rooted in the learner's interactions with and reflections about the world. Critical consciousness is only achieved when action and reflection are both present. Action without reflection is merely activism; reflection without action is only verbalism (Freire, 1993).

Lecture is a primary modality in banking education. Knowledge flows unidirectionally from teacher to learner, and the roles of teacher and learner remain separate and distinct. In Freirean education, *dialogue* replaces lecture as the primary modality. Roles are shared; the teacher becomes a colearner, the learner a coteacher. Knowledge is not so much transmitted from one to the other as it is generated through the process of dialogue between or among teacher/learners and learner/teachers. This is similar to what Mezirow (1991) terms *rational discourse*. However, contrary to some andragogues, Freire believes authentic thinking about (social) reality can *only* take place in communicative contexts. Therefore, optimal human learning only occurs in community (Freire, 1993). Freire even extends this notion to theology, which he describes as "a dialogue between man and God" (Freire, 2-3-93, lecture notes).

When one considers Ong's analysis of how the predominance of orality wanes as societies become more literate, it is interesting to note that Freire actually uses orality to develop literacy. From Ong's perspective, (external) dialogue becomes interiorized as reading and writing develops. Freire seeks to develop a sort of interior dialogue, i.e. reflection, by means of exterior oral discourse which links theory and action to social reality. ng argues that literacy

removes knowledge from the arena of everyday existence. Freire uses everyday existence to develop the skills of critical reflection. Thus, knowledge is always situated in the human lifeworld.

Freire's approach to learning maintains orality while fostering the development of critical self-awareness. This is important to a Christian model of emancipatory education for at least two reasons. First, dialogue is by definition participatory in nature. It requires more than one person. "Wherever two or more are gathered..." (Matt. 18:20). It lends itself to fellowship and community, even when these take alternative forms such as home meetings and online forums. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the apostle Paul employed dialogical modalities (see uses of the Gk. *dialegomai* in Acts 17:2; 18:4).

Second, Freire's method links principle and process. Reflective praxis increases the likelihood that learners will critically examine their own experiences in the world, as well as existing institutional doctrines and practices. To paraphrase Freire, lay Christian adults will not read the *Word* without also reading the world.

Toward a Model of Emancipatory Christian Education

The approach to Christian discipleship which I propose borrows from both Knowles and Freire. The overall philosophical perspective I follow is andragogical; the method is Freirean. I hold that those of us who disciple others need to treat adult Christians as regenerated individuals whose core selves more closely resemble the nature of Christ than that of Adam. We also need to incorporate their larger base of life experiences into the process. When we utilize the Bible, we should endeavor to relate the scripture to the real issues which disciples face in the present, as opposed to merely teaching doctrines and preparing people for heaven. To the extent we can plan learning, it is important to

structure and sequence educational opportunities out of a sensitivity to disciples' readiness to learn. Finally, we need to design processes and structures which encourage and facilitate more self-directedness and learner-centeredness.

In order to sensitize disciples to the ways in which the world--both secular and religious--can oppress them, I propose using a model which builds upon Freire's participatory dialogical approach to teaching. Teacher and disciple are really collaborative colearners. The pastor/teacher becomes a mentor/facilitator who guides the disciple in critical reflection on the world, along with hermeneutical interpretation and application of the Word of God to real personal and social situations, and who models and provokes the taking of action (i.e., good works) to affect the reflected-upon world. This "world, Word, works" model is illustrated in Figure 1. I call it a *praxis cycle*.

Praxis Cycle

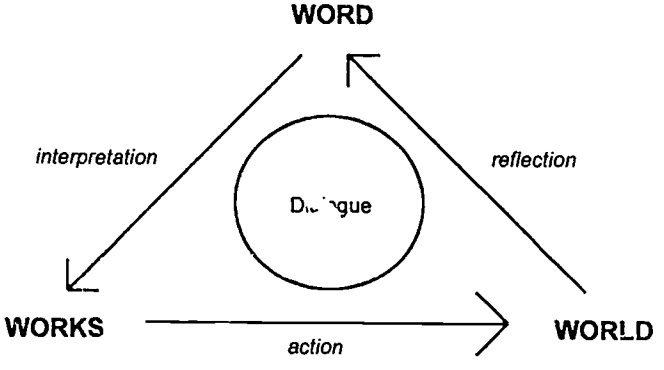

Figure 1

By structuring learning experiences to follow a praxis cycle, colearner/facilitators ensure that disciples always consider the world along with the Word, and that they apply the scriptures in a meaningfully active way in order to transform the world. Disciples mature as they construct biblical approaches to real-world situations.

They learn hermeneutics--not from a textbook in a classroom--but by consistently applying the praxis cycle to everyday experience. The important text is the Bible. The hermeneutic is a lived-out interpretation. People become living reference letters of God (II Cor. 3:2,3) or, to paraphrase the apostle, the *Word becomes flesh* in the lives of disciples. The action component mitigates the apathy and lethargy that often result from more passive "banking" Bible teaching.

Because the praxis cycle requires dialogue, it encourages participation. Christian fellowship is built-in to the process (Heb.10:25). Dialogue among fellow disciples also acts as a sort of reality-check which keeps the development of fringe ideas to a minimum. The group functions as a hermeneutical community (Hiebert, 1988). The teacher/colearner facilitates the process in order to evoke personal meanings, interpretations, and applications from his/her colearners. Of course, an elder will be more theologically sophisticated that his/her colearners, just as Freire's facilitators are more literate than other culture circle participants. However, s/he must resist the urge to lecture or transmit predigested doctrine. The disciples' struggle to make theological sense is essential to the learning process.

Most traditional church settings are not conducive to dialogue. Generally, facilities are designed to support a banking approach to discipleship. However, dialogue can easily take place in a variety of other, more participative settings: homes, smaller classrooms in churches and schools, offices, restaurants, parks, automobiles, and even online forums in cyberspace. Thus, the praxis cycle fits the needs of the evolving Church by being adaptable to virtually any organizational setting or venue, with the exception of the lecture hall and the cathedral.

Earlier, I noted the problem of idiosyncratic theologies I encountered during my pastoral practice. Hiebert (1988) has noted the similar difficulties missionaries encounter when indigenous churches insist on developing culturally-specific theologies. He calls for a *metatheology*, i.e., a common approach to

theologizing which is applicable across cultures, to assuage concerns over theological orthodoxy. I see the need for a metatheology that applies on an individual level (Lai, 1992). While not comprehensive enough to constitute an entire metatheology, the praxis cycle is an example of a metatheological approach to Christian education. It teaches a "way of theologizing" rather than merely teaching theological doctrines--process instead of principle.

Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed what I consider to be some serious problems in the western Church today: apathy and lethargy, individual conceptions of God, and the inability to distinguish between biblical and institutional standards. In my opinion, these symptoms result from oppressive approaches to Christian adult education which tacitly encourage passivity and dependence instead of participation and self-directedness on the part of disciples. Current approaches are generally limited to teaching theological principles and doctrines through teacher-centered, lecture-oriented modalities.

I have presented an alternative approach which uses a participative modality within an andragogical philosophical framework to transmit theological processes, as well as content. I have introduced the concept of a praxis cycle as a model process for teacher/facilitators to follow in helping disciples develop the competencies necessary to become biblically literate, critically conscious, and actively involved Christian citizens.

It may be too much to hope that, in the near future, learner-centered participative approaches such as I have proposed will completely replace the more traditional educational philosophies which dominate today. Perhaps it is progress enough if churches and seminaries augment their existing programs with groups which utilize the praxis cycle to critically examine and actualize what comes from

the pulpit and lectern. However, Christian leaders should beware of the socio-technical revolution which is taking place right under their noses. It is imperative to develop innovative organizational and educational forms which will keep up with changes in communication technology, family lifestyles, and economic forces, and yet remain true to the Bible. Systems of organization and instruction which originated over four centuries ago already show the strains of antiquity.

Finally, if the Church is ever to "grow up into all aspects of Him" (Ephesians 4:15), those who hold the interpretive power must give it away to all members of the body of Christ. When this final shackle of institutional oppression is sheared from the minds and hearts of those who bear Christ's name, the emancipation that began with Luther will be complete. Such freedom is not likely to be attained through another reformation, however, but a revolution.

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